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## A RECIPE *for* SUCCESS



DOYENS OF THE F&B BUSINESS DISCUSS THE NEED TO KEEP PACE WITH CHANGING CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS WHILE ACHIEVING GROWTH OBJECTIVES

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# IN AUTO MODE

As intelligent room automation seems set to become the future of hospitality, hoteliers are seeking solutions that will give their brands a competitive edge as well as ROI

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Imagine entering a hotel room and saying, “Alexa, switch off all lights, close the blinds, change the AC temperature to 24°Celsius, change the television channel to NDTV News” and all this happening with only your voice? Well, this is no longer a fantasy but a reality thanks to new-age in-room automation. As hospitality moves to the next level and hoteliers look for some key differentiators that will give their brands an edge over competition, in-room automation could well be one of those decisive factors.

Guest room automation systems enable hoteliers to provide their guests the convenience of controlling multiple functions in their room including lighting, temperature, drapes and audio/video systems using automated interfaces. Devesh Rawat, hotel manager at Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway said that it is getting more prevalent, from automated lighting that is switched on when the guest’s presence is detected in the room, to automated security systems that allow them to enjoy their privacy. “Even the method of placing or-



Prashant Govindan, senior director India and Srilanka, Harman Professional.

1. Royal suites at Royal Orchid.

ders with in-room dining can be further simplified through ‘all in-one consoles’ that give guests a master control over the ambience and experience in the room. From automated linen change and turndown service alerts to automatically replenishing guest amenities, smart technology is built into the room, which can revolutionize the overall guest experience,” he added.

Ashish Bakshi, executive assistant manager at Hotel Royal Orchid added, “It started with guests being able to control drapes, lights, temperature, TV, and music. Today, it has advanced to a welcome scene being activated upon guests entering the hotel rooms with the lights turning on, music playing, drapes opening, and the TV displaying a personalised greeting welcoming them to the room. Similarly, there are customised wake-up scenes, valet request service, sensors detecting guest occupancy, turning off of lights and setting of thermostats to reduce energy waste.”

“To meet guest expectations, majority of hotels are spending extensively on technology like pay-

ment security, guest room technology, mobile engagement, etc. The trends observed in in-room automation began with a simple electronic check-in for guests. It has now aligned with the trend of guest personalization and curated automated system solutions,” said Saptarshi Biswas, director of rooms, Bengaluru Marriott Hotel Whitefield.

### USAGE BARRIERS

Most hotels, however, restrict in room automation to light and climate control as well as in-room entertainment largely because of cost implications. Many hotels have already invested large sums of money on in-built smart and audio-visual equipment technologies and the cost implication of changing the same would be quite high.

“Other industries have embraced automation; manufacturing especially has massively increased its productivity thanks to it, and Robotics Process Automation (RPA) led by companies such as UiPath promises to replace the repetitive, rules-based tasks present in many financial institutions. Yet, hotels seem to be free of such technology, despite the presence of many repetitive, rules-based jobs,” claimed Gaurav Shetty, MD of Goldfinch Hotels.

This could be because of several changes at both the front and back-end of hotels. On the backend, hotels employ people who do a lot of manual and non-routine jobs, such as cleaning tables, hotel rooms, folding towels, tidying equipment, etc. “While these tend to be low paid, they are harder to automate than say the routine jobs found on the factory floor or accounting departments. That is probably why many hotels shy away from automation because guest experiences are highly dependent on the efficacy of such backend tasks,” opined Shetty.

However, today’s traveller is extremely specific in terms of needs and rooming requirements. “We have brought in certain automated systems to extend a comfortable environment to the guest and simultaneously, we also monitor its output. I do not see any reason why one must not look forth to technological advancements and acquire as much as operationally feasible. However, at the same time, one needs to be careful about what one intends to offer. It entails a deep market understanding and gauging the pros and cons along with viability,” advised Ravi Rai, general manager, Novotel Visakhapatnam Varun Beach and Bheemili Resort managed by Accor.

### INVESTMENT MATTERS

The calculation of in-room automation ROI can be determined on its impact to the bottomline and the value that customers perceive due to its presence.



Faiz Alam Ansari, complex GM,  
Aloft Bengaluru Cessna Business  
Park.



Avinash Gautam, CEO of Silvan  
Innovation Labs.

2. Suites at Novotel  
Visakhapatnam Varun Beach.

3. Bengaluru Marriott Hotel,  
Whitefield.



“These solutions enable high return on investment through improved operational efficiencies, effective management of resources, total guest comfort and convenience, and enhanced customer services,” opined Shetty. Incidentally, their first smart hotel under the Goldfinch Brand is being planned in Vashi, Navi Mumbai where they are likely to deploy lots of in-room automation. A viable investment in the near future would be on Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) that uses electromagnetic fields to automatically identify and track tags attached to objects. “The tags contain electronically stored information. Passive tags collect energy from a nearby RFID reader’s interrogating radio waves. RFID are in form of chips which are made into tags. These tags are attached with the linen. The reader of the RFID is in form of a wand that can read the tags from a distance of two meters or more. The coding of the same is done in such a way that it can read each linen piece and can tell the product’s history. The advantage of the same is that it is a one-time investment and can count the linen in one go, which will help in saving time,” said Rawat.

### TREND CHECK

From smart thermostats, automated systems in lighting, ventilation, air conditioning and security, this is the age of automation. “For a guest’s security, a particular floor can only be accessed with a valid key card issued by the front office. Going a step further, we have also introduced Single Lady Rooms

that have an audio-visual facility. This ensures that the lady guest is absolutely sure while opening the door. Also, she may choose to interact with the attendants via the audio facility, in case she is not comfortable opening the door in. While in bed, she may simply choose her mode of interaction and continue to enjoy her stay," said Rai.

When it comes to entertainment, Avinash Gautam, CEO of Silvan Innovation Labs explained that the "ability for guests to play content of their cell-phone to TV is going to be the trend in coming years. Guests will check into hotels with their digital devices that have their own entertainment. Our automation system will enable casting of their phones or tabs on the TV. They can use voice commands to control devices when sleepy and easy access to television channels is also in. Some hotels in the US have started offering this voice enabled system and it is proving to be a big hit with their customers."

Recent trends that have picked up include personalized screen and videos for guests. Some hotels also provide getting on-screen control of the television. One of the most unique features that is trending is a feature button labelled 'Leaving Room' by



Gaurav Shetty, MD, Goldfinch Hotels.



Ravi Rai, GM, Novotel Visakhapatnam Varun Beach and Bheemili Resort.

the entry door that automatically places the suite in an energy-saving mode - with a single touch, it closes blinds, turns off lights and dials back air conditioners for energy savings.

Faiz Alam Ansari, complex GM of Aloft Bengaluru Cessna Business Park said, "In Aloft Cessna Business Park, we have programmed our key system in such a way that it supports SPG keyless entry to your room. We upgraded our room locks and changed our key making software and modified this in the corporate mobile app."

**VENDOR CONSIDERATIONS**

Choosing the right product as a right fit is usually guided by factors like guest comfort, differentiation of service value perception, User Interface (UI) of the automation system and stability of the system as well as the back end usage support. Sourcing a vendor who has access to the latest technology and equipment in the market is important so that the systems are always updated at the property.

The colour palette, shape, user friendliness, type of material utilized also needs to be considered while selecting the equipment. Vendors, on the other hand, are in touch with major hospitality brands and participate in various forums to inform about new-age solutions for enhancing the guest experiences that will bring them both tangible and intangible benefits.

"There are several deployments with the latest voice control systems in progress and new excitement and eagerness is seen by hotelier to deploy these. We also work with hotels for providing the customised solutions beyond the basic ones solving some pain points or some great feature they might be looking for," said Shetty.

Prashant Govindan, senior director-India and Sri Lanka, Harman Professional said that his company has deployed a special business development team





whose role is to approach hospitality chains and educate them on the new immersive technology experience, give them demos and also show them the future of increasing the scope of loyalty programs with the analytic ability of the Watson IoT system. "With Watson analytics, business intelligence can be easily drawn. One can take loyalty programs to the next level by providing personalisation for each and every guest. Once your profile is loaded in the system, you can have a system giving you wake up call at your preferred time, take care of your entertainment preferences in terms of what type of music, which television channel, etc. It can also change the whole in-room dining experience, so that the minibar can be loaded with your favourite sacks and drinks and the system can prompt you about the last dish you had ordered and whether you would like to try the same again," he excitedly pointed out.

**GOING GREEN**

In-room automation systems have been one of the most popular systems in recent times, providing benefits of real-time facilities and seamless integration of services for enhanced customer experiences in hotels. A majority of these systems are eco-friendly thus saving fuel, man power, electricity and energy.

"The climate control system is fitted with a dual purpose of energy saving as well as maintaining optimum temperature of the room. This system is activated only once the guest enters the room and inserts the key card in the designated slot. There are several automated room lighting system that are in place from the lighting in the room to the blinds in the washrooms and the in - built lights in the wardrobe are all programmed to get activated once the guest enters the room and utilizes the key card," said Rawat.

In-room automation undoubtedly helps save labour costs to an extent and also catalyses the process of energy saving, which stands out as a great support in hotel operations. Sonica Malhotra, Joint MD of MBD Group added, "In MBD Prive Collection at Radisson Blu Noida, we have deployed high-tech lighting controls that work on occupancy sensors and detect activity within a certain area. It saves energy by turning lights off soon after the last occupant has left the space. This, in turn, saves 2% to



Sonica Malhotra, Joint MD, MBD Group.



Saptarshi Biswas, director of rooms, Bengaluru Marriott Hotel, Whitefield.

4&5. Prive Crescent, MBD Prive Collection, Radisson Blu MBD Hotel, Noida.

6. Hotel Goldfinch Mumbai.

7. The Presidential suite at Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway.

8. The Gateway room at Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway.



3% HLP in guest rooms and via motion sensors in corridor lighting. As far as air conditioning controls go, we are using advance technology thermostat with energy saving mode that allows the guest to set the temperature as required with display on the screen near bedside. When the room is not occupied, the FCU fan speed automatically goes in slow mode and conserves the energy." The property has also installed an advanced Technology Head Showers (Shower Tronic) system in its rooms that are equipped with different type of water flows which automatically allows setting the desired temperature and water flow.

**INTEGRATION IS KEY**

The in-room automation system at present is not integrated with the digital platforms yet. If these solutions are made available on a guest's smart phone, it will mean a huge technological leap. However, this move would also mean that the most stringent security protocols need to be put in place because the guest's data should not be breached. In fact, many guests are wary about downloading hotel apps on their mobiles, despite the ease of convenience it offers, because they fear intrusion of privacy and data theft.

Technology has become critical to retain guests at hotels and to achieve this, hoteliers are keen to invest in a wide range of solutions provides an immediate thrust in customer engagement. Intelligent automation is the future of hospitality trade and hotel guests are all set to be in a win-win situation. ■